

*The Question discussed concerning the Appearance of
the Matrices of so many Conventual Seals. By Mr.
Pegge. In a Letter to Gustavus Brander, Esquire.*

Read at the Society of ANTIQUARIES May 7, 1778.

DEAR SIR,

THERE are an infinite variety of seals engraved in authors, and amongst them a considerable number of conventual ones. Most of these last have been taken from impressions in wax appendant to old deeds and charters, but others have been copied from the *matrices* themselves still remaining amongst us. You, Sir, have a most valuable collection of these latter, and other gentlemen of my acquaintance are possessed of many, in-somuch that all together they amount to a considerable number.

It is a problem of some difficulty to account for the appearance of so many *conventual originals* at this time, considering in what manner these matrices were anciently disposed of; as by passing in succession from one person, or officer, to another; by being demanded by the ordinary on the deaths of abbats and priors, &c. or, lastly, directed to be broken, on those events.



A

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL seals, which expressed the office only, and did not exhibit the proper name of the officer in their legends, were ambulatory things, passing from one person to another, and therefore could not be numerous. Seals of rural deanries, officialities, &c. were of this sort (as the keepers of them were liable to be displaced [a],) and went of course into the hands of the next persons that enjoyed those offices. Hence, Otto, the legate, "Let them who have taken an office, *which is but for a time*, "as rural deans and officials, forthwith, and without trouble, "resign their seals at the expiration of their office to him from "whom they received them; which seal is to have the name "of the office only graven upon it [b]." Wherefore if any of these temporary officers should happen to die, these seals, as they bore not their proper names, were ready to be delivered, without any alteration, to the persons who were next to succeed to the offices. They ran accordingly, in a general form, adaptable to any possessor; take these for a specimen:

Sigillum officij decani de B [c].

Sigillum decani decanatus de Ospreng [d].

Sigillum officialitatis de Wengbam [e].

Sigillum regiae majestatis ad causas ecclesiasticas, pro decanatu de Sonnyng [f].

&c. &c. &c.

[a] Cowel, v. *Dean*. Somner, *Antiq. Canterb.* p. 176.

[b] Legatine Constitut. of Otto, A. D. 1237, l. 28.

[c] Thorne, *Chron.* col. 2160.

[d] The *Matrix* is penes Rev. Edw. Taylor of Bifrons, c. Cant.

[e] Lewis on Seals, p. 8.

[f] *Archaeologia Soc. Antiq.* III. p. 425.

I FIND it is the opinion of bishop Kennet, that the rural deans had no other appointment or commission but the custody of the seal [g].

WHEREAS, again, seals of this species were, by special injunction, to be kept with extraordinary care [h]; they could not be often lost, either through negligence or accident. And I beg leave to observe further, before I proceed to the next point, that one would imagine from Otto's constitution relative to seals [i], that every abbat and prior, whose benefices were perpetual, might have, or rather ought to have, a seal of his own with his name upon it, apart and separate from the house or monastery. The words are, "Statuimus, ut Sigillum habeant non solum Archiepiscopi et Episcopi, sed etiam eorum officiales. Item Abbates, Priores, et Decani, necnon Ecclesiarum cathedralium Capitula, et caetera quaecunque Collegia, simul cum suis Rectoris, aut *divisim*, juxta eorum consuetudinem vel statutum. Pro varietate cujuslibet praedictorum habeat unusquisque Sigillum, puta nomen dignitatis, officij seu collegij, et etiam illorum *proprium nomen*, qui dignitatis vel officij perpetui gaudent honore, insculptum notis et characteribus manifestis." But it certainly was not so; for though the heads of great and opulent foundations had indeed their own seals, conformable to the regulation, or at least by favour of his holiness the Pope [k],

[g] MS. letter of bishop Kennett to bishop Gardiner, inserted in his own copy of the Paroch. Antiq. now in the possession of my singular good friend Richard Gough, Esq.

[h] Otto, *ibid*.

[i] The scarcity of Notaries Public occasioned Otto's appointment of authentic seals, as they were called; and indeed there were so few of those practitioners here, that I have seen them fetched from Lichfield into York diocese, and vice versa.

[k] Du Fresne, tom. VI. col. 491.

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yet in lesser houses, colleges, and hospitals, one seal *often* [l] served for the head and the body [m], and the seal run, without expressing the proper name of the head; as

Sigillum jurisdictionis parve Malvern [n].

S. comune domus beate marie de Furnesio [o].

Sigillum Ospitalis Sci Nicolai de Hebeldon.

Sigillum conventus ecclesie sancti Gregorij Cantuarie.

Sigill. Abbatie de bello capite.

Sigillum abbatis de rupe [p].

Sigillum come Ecclesie. om Scoru Derbi [q].

There was no need therefore for seals like these to be renewed upon every vacancy of the headship, and consequently these, passing from one hand to another, were as little liable to be lost as those of rural deans or officials. The seal of the priory of Dover is very singular, bearing both the prior's name and the office;

S. officij roberti prioris de Doverey [r].

The reason of which I apprehend to be, that this prior had a seal apart from the body, or rather had a *secretum Sigillum*, or private seal, as a gentleman.

2dly, **THE** seals of deceased bishops were to be delivered by their executors to the archbishops of their respective provinces.

[l] Not always, for see Drake, Ebor. Append. p. ci. and plate.

[m] Mabillon apud Du Fresne VI. col. 491. Stat. 35 E. I. in Gibson's Cod. p. 1223. The abbat however had his private seal. Ibid.

[n] A matrix in Mr. Brander's possession.

[o] West's Hist. of Furness, Append. N° XIII.

[p] Of these four I have drawings.

[q] i. e. Sigillum Commune Ecclesie omnium Sanctorum Derbie; a cast pennesme.

[r] Lewis on Seals, p. 1.

or *sede vacante* to their chapters, as guardians of the spiritualities; and so on the decease of archbishops their chapters were to have their seals brought and given to them [1], though, as I am informed by the best authority, the seals of the archbishops are now given into the hands of the king. As the expression is plural in this case, *omnia Sigilla*, I should suppose the personal seals of bishops, as well as their official ones, were to be given up to the archbishops; for to the probate of the will of Alexander Bache, bishop of St. Asaph, 15 Sept. 1394, a memorandum is annexed, that the archbishop was to have from every bishop of St. Asaph, when he died, his pontifical ring, *et signetum suum oblongum optimum*, &c [2] where certainly we ought to read, *et signetum suum, et Sigillum suum*, &c. But be this as it may, the official seals of abbats and priors ought, by parity of reason, to be sent to the bishops of their respective dioceses, though I have not found any express direction for it; for the reason of the custom or ordinance was, that no sinister uses, to the prejudice of the sees, might be made of the departed bishop's seal, and there was equal danger of abuses in the case of defunct abbats and priors. Hence, then, it would come to pass, that very few of these episcopal seals could ever, in appearance, be lost [3], so as to come into the hands of posterity; for the motion of ordering them to be delivered up to the superior, the archbishops or their convents, was, that they might be destroyed, in order to

[1] Wharton, A. S. L. p. 88. or Willis's Survey of Ch. of St. Asaph, p. 215,

[2] Willis, *ibidem*.

[3] By the *Reformatio Legum* 1550, they were to be defaced, and the materials to be given back to the executors, and probably the practice was the same more anciently. Mr. Lewis, p. 31, speaks of their consisting sometimes of gems or precious stones; but here he confounds the *secretæ sigilla* with the large official ones; unless the private seals were to be given up also; for the official seals were never composed of any such valuable materials.

prevent:

prevent any misapplication of them, or falsification by them; and in fact, we see very few *matrices* now of the order of bishops, though those of the abbats and priors are so numerous as to occasion the present enquiry and discussion.

3dly, If the conventual seals, properly so called, were not given up to the diocesan, as conjectured above, yet, on the same principle of precaution, they were broken and destroyed, in the presence of certain witnesses at the convent. Mr. Lewis says, that in case of a bishop's death, his episcopal seal is at this time broken in the presence of the archbishop of the province [w]; and Dr. Browne Willis writes, "The archbishop, as I am informed, still demands of the executors of every deceased bishop his episcopal seal, which is oftentimes delivered whole, *notwithstanding the order that it should be broke* in the presence of "so many members of the chapters of each see [x]." And as to conventual seals, on the death of Adam de Boothbie, abbat of Peterborough, the seal of the monastery was broken [y]; and the seal of a deprived abbat was broken in like manner at Westminster [z].

BUT how are we to reconcile the breaking of the seal with the former article of delivering it up to the ordinary? I answer, though the order was to break them, as Willis states it, and this was the regular method of proceeding, yet that rule might not be always observed. That in fact it came much to the same thing; for as the receivers of the seals of defunct abbats and priors took them not as things of value in themselves, as being

[w] Lewis, p. 31. The Pope's seal is broken on a demise. Hist. of Cardinals, p. 296.

[x] Willis, *ibidem*, p. 216.

[y] Gunton, p. 46. See also Wharton Ang. Sac. I. p. 739.

[z] Widmore's Account of Westminster Abbey, p. 34.

commonly made of no better metal than brass or copper, but only as guardians to prevent any improper use that might be made of them, it answered the same purpose whether the matrices were given to them whole or broken; for if whole, they were supposed to pass, by the surrender of them, into safe hands, which would infallibly keep them from misapplication, or even from any further use.

Now, Sir, I would ask, whether upon this state of the case, one has not good reason for wondering how it is possible such a number of conventual *matrices*, as even you yourself are possessed of, should be at this day remaining? Some perhaps may imagine, for the solution of this difficulty, which I think has never been considered, though it seems so well to merit our attention, that seals have not unfrequently been interred with their masters or owners, and so the business is dispatched at once. But this is far from being satisfactory; for though many seals, as well as other valuables, may have been buried with their owners[a], yet these, so far as I can find, have always been the seals of private persons, one of those belonging to monasteries or bodies corporate having even been discovered in a grave.

I would beg leave therefore rather to suggest, first, that the religious houses had not only different seals for different purposes, as *ad causas*, &c. but that they also found frequent occasion, for one reason or other, to alter and change their seals. Thus the great priory of Christ church Canterbury, as we learn from Mr. Somner, had no less than four different seals[b]; the priory at Dover had two at least[c]; the abbey of Beauchief

[a] Lewis, p. 7. Gent. Mag. 1754. p. 410. 1755. p. 211. Camd. col. 892. for that I apprehend to have been the seal of a private person.

[b] Somner's Antiq. Cant. p. 149.

[c] Lewis, p. 1.

c. Derby, and the friars hermits at York as many [d]. The old seal then, I conceive, when a new one was made, might possibly be thrown about and neglected, since we know nothing about the surrendry or breaking of that in such case. Perhaps many of the matrices now in being, may not be the *last* seals of the houses they belonged to [e]; indeed one cannot be sure that any of them are, except they happen to tally with the impressions appendant to the surrenders in the augmentation office.

2dly, THE seals of the rural deans, of which several are extant, might, through negligence, be lost. For though seals in general were kept with the utmost care and caution [f], yet they were sometime missing [g]; and in the case of these deans, though they were commanded to keep their seals strictly, as was noted above, yet these orders and injunctions were not always punctually obeyed. We have seen before, that abbeyes, priories, and colleges, did not conform to Otto's regulation about putting the proper names of their principals upon their respective seals; whence I argue, that as the ecclesiastics, monks, and seculars, were tardy in certain respects, so the rural deans might not always surrender their seals when displaced; and, indeed, we find they were sometimes very

[d] Drawings of the former are in my hands; and see Drake in Append. p. ci. for the latter.

[e] The seal of Robert, prior of Dover, abovementioned, could not possibly be that which was put to the surrender, for the surrendrer's name was *Joh. Willis*, Mittr. Abb. II. p. 99.

[f] Otto, p. 67. 69. Du Fresne, VI. col. 487. seq. Statut. 35. E. I. in Gibson, p. 1223. Lewis, p. 30. Hence they were sometimes carried about the neck; Hoveden, p. 390. Olearius, p. 368. See also M. Paris in Vit. Abb. p. 256. Hence Lyndwood, "tanto diligentia adhibetur cautior, quanto rei abusus est periculosior."

[g] Philipot, Villare Cant. p. 361. Dugd. Warw. p. 673. Baron. II. p. 457. Lewis, p. 69. seq.

loth

loth to do it on account of the profit that accrued from them [b]. Now in this case, it was no more than natural, that several of their seals, when they came to die, should, by their relations and executors, be considered as so much brass and of little or no value, and consequently be easily lost. But what perhaps is the most worthy of observation in the case of these decanal seals, of which so many now remain, the office at last was itself supereded [i], and then the badges of it would necessarily become uselefs and insignificant.

I CAN imagine, again, upon the same ground, that though the practice might be for the religious houses and colleges to break their seals on the death of their rectors and principals, yet this might not always be complied with. At this time, as we have seen, the order is, that the seals of deceased bishops should be broken, but they are nevertheless often delivered whole and entire to the archbishop of the province. Besides, there was often much hurry and confusion on those occasions: and lastly, though seals were kept with all imaginable care, and even under several locks, yet they were liable to be stolen, mislaid, or otherwise lost. A wrangle sometimes happened in the house, about keeping those of abbeys and priories, and this might occasion the purloining or secreting of them. Mr. Lewis observes, that an act of parliament passed anno 1307, "whereby it was ordained, that the abbats of the orders of Cistercienses and Praemonstratenses, and other religious orders, whose seal had heretofore been used to remain only in the custody of the abbat, and not of the convent, should hereafter have a com-

[b] Joh. Athon, in Ottonis Constitut. p. 69. See also Kennet, Par. Ant. p. 650.

[i] Kennet, Par. Antiq. p. 643, seq.

"mon seal, which should remain in the custody of the prior
 "and four of the most worthy and discreet men of the convent
 "to be layed up in safe keeping under the abbat's private
 "seal[k];" which plainly imports, there had been some disturbances about this business.

4thly, In cases where conventual seals were delivered up whole to the ordinary, they might often be little regarded or esteemed by *them*, from a notion of their usefulness, and so be cast into a corner; or passing into the hands of incurious, perhaps ignorant, executors, on the death of the said ordinary, might be totally disregarded as refuse.

LASTLY, I observe, that if from any cause, as from changing them, or otherwise, monastic seals should have grown obsolete, they would naturally be thrown aside into the public chest among the archives. And then, at the general dissolution of religious houses, under Henry VIII, a good number of them would probably be brought to light at once, and dispersed. This consequently was the season when they were most plentifully to be collected; and though many of them, no doubt, would be heedlessly thrown about, sold for old brass, and lost, yet others, by more careful people, would be preserved in families[1]. And these, we may rationally suppose, when a taste and love for such antiques were once excited, would be diligently sought after, and most highly valued, by the curious modern antiquary.

THESE, Sir, are the thoughts and reflections with which I satisfy myself in regard to the appearance of so many *matrices*

[k] Lewis, p. 30.

[1] Gent. Mag. 1770, p. 155.

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of the monastic seals; and I shall be happy if they meet with your acquiescence, or do but in the least tend to remove scruples upon this head.

I am, Sir,

Your most obedient servant,

SAMUEL PEGGE.

Whitington, Oct. 20, 1777.

